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Making the ‘Other’ from ‘Us’: The Representation of British Converts to Islam in Mainstream British Newspapers

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Abstract

There is now a great deal of literature that shows how Islam and Muslims are routinely represented in negative ways in the mainstream newspapers. With overt or covert reliance on Orientalist discourse, discourses of cultural clash and extremism, including terror, are prevalent. Not only are Muslims less likely to feature in “normal” stories, abuse and prejudice against them is also more unlikely to constitute “news”. British converts to Islam have only recently begun to receive more focused attention, both in academia and in the mainstream press. Occupying a unique position in respect to the idea of the “other” and of integration in a multicultural society, converts offer a powerful point of critique of these concepts. The aim of this study is to understand how and in what discourses British converts to Islam are represented, and thereby contribute empirical knowledge to these theoretical concerns.

Key Words: British, Muslims, Converts, Mainstream Newspapers, Media

Introduction

Much of the literature on how Islam and Muslims are represented in the media stands in the intellectual legacy of Edward Said¹. In his book, *Orientalism*, Edward Said² argued that as a result of colonialism (including its post- and neo- affixes) and colonial experience, understandings of the “West” and of the “Orient” have left an ontological and epistemological legacy of distinction between, and (mis)understanding and (mis)representation of, them both. It is thus that Orientalism is “an exercise of cultural strength” through which “the Oriental is *contained* and *represented* by dominating frameworks”.³ The legacy and content of these ‘dominating frameworks’ limit what can be said to the extent that escaping racism and ethnocentrism, whether latent or manifest, is almost unthinkable – in a Bourdieusian sense, that is, where the tools for recognition do not exist.⁴

The media plays a significant role in how these (mis)representations are constructed, framed and disseminated. It provides its audiences with interpretive frameworks and thus ways of understanding the world⁵, and carries as well as constructs meaning frames, which inextricably link language and human society.⁶ It can shape views and debates and thus has important social effects.⁷ Owing to the fact that with a lack of cultural contact, “British Muslims are ‘known’ to non-Muslims in the UK mostly through the media”⁸, the news media is a primary institution in the cultural production of knowledge.

Studies using a range of methodologies have consistently shown that there is a dearth of Muslims appearing in “normal stories”.⁹ Islam and Muslims, as a result, enter the consciousness of a large number of British people through a narrow diversity of roles and ‘newsworthy’ topics, limited to oil, terrorism, and issues of conflict more broadly, including social and cultural threat, and gender (in)equality. This, therefore, limits wider knowledge about Islam and Muslims. These limiting frameworks and understandings mean representations remain trapped within what the Runnymede Trust referred to as “closed” views of Islam as opposed to “open” views.¹⁰ Subsequently, Islam is seen

in monolithic and inferior rather than different and diverse terms, while Britain is painted in a more positive light, blaming the “other” and the failure of multiculturalism. In Poole’s study she found that where the topic had a British focus, the emphasis shifted from Orientalist discourse to one of nation and identity and was, as a result, less homogenizing and essentializing¹¹. Nevertheless, in this respect, positive representation of British Muslims was restricted to those values important in British culture, otherwise Muslims were seen to be problematic to the majority culture and coverage restricted to only a few reductive categories. The framing of discriminatory discourse and discrimination in this discourse entwines Islam as a faith, Muslims as a people and “their” cultural practices.¹² Moreover, drawing on Du Bois’s “double consciousness”, Nasar Meer notes the media’s role in the fact that “external narratives on minority identity impinge upon the sorts of consciousness minorities experience”.¹³

Despite these negative discourses, numbers of British people converting to Islam have been rising over the last decade.¹⁴ From the position of the discourses this phenomenon becomes difficult to understand. As a result of this trend, and as the status of British converts to Islam as majority or minority is more ambiguous in these terms, it has been suggested that they occupy a unique intermediary position as bridge-builders¹⁵. Nevertheless, in his report published in Faith Matters¹⁶ M.A. Kevin Brice found that the percentage of stories about converts¹⁷ linked to terror was in fact considerably higher at 62%, compared to 36% for Muslims more broadly, and that this rose to 78% when articles about fundamentalism or extremism and other violence or criminality are included.¹⁸

This article aims to show how British converts to Islam are represented in this reporting and in what frameworks they are understood through examining articles from the British mainstream newspapers. By so doing it looks at how, while some of these frameworks are very similar to those of British Muslims more generally, there are also differences because of their more ambiguous majority-minority position as converts. It uses a Discourse Analysis approach to understanding sociocultural frameworks and “*whether and how we see* differences and consequently how those differences become politically significant”¹⁹. As journalists mediate the relationship and space between elite ideology and news content they play a significant role in maintaining, reproducing, or changing, existing discourses,²⁰ which can also be understood as hegemony in its Gramscian sense²¹ through which development of the seemingly common-sense, or the “regime of the ‘taken for granted’”²², takes place. It thus also assesses the scope for which may serve as bridge-builders, arguing that on this evidence that potential is in fact limited in important ways.

The discussion presented here is based on analysis of 191 articles between 2008 and May 2015 from mainstream British newspapers identified as having the widest readership.²³ The articles in this sample were collected and accessed through the respective papers’ websites and the LexisNexis database. The search terms *convert/conversion/revert* were alternately paired with *Muslim/Islam*. While it is likely that not every relevant article was picked up, a sufficient number have been found for the sample to be considered broadly representative of reporting

Media Representation of British Converts to Islam

A limited range of topic *foci* emerged from the preliminary analysis as can be seen in Table 1 below. In total 55% of the articles, forming the largest topic category in the sample for this study, were directly reporting on British converts to Islam who had either planned or carried out an act of terror and were represented as either one or a combination of terrorist, extremist, radical. Taking into account other stories in which converts are reported with a main focus on criminality or violence, this figure rises to two-thirds of the sample. Furthermore, terror, terrorist and terrorism form the second most frequent word used, coming only behind “years”. These facts are themselves significant. If we accept that media coverage is an important source of cultural knowledge production, then even this broad framing of Muslim converts is likely to have a strong impact on how they are perceived in society more widely.

As Fiyaz Mughal, director of Faith Matters, remarks, there is an inherent danger here: “Converts who become extremists or terrorists are, of course, a legitimate story. But my worry is that the saturation of such stories risks equating all Muslim converts with being some sort of problem when the vast majority are not.”²⁴

The following table shows a breakdown of the main *foci* of stories in the sample across the newspapers (columns include Sunday editions of newspapers):

Table 1: Percentage of Articles by Topics and Themes in British Media

Topic/ Theme	<i>The Time s</i>	<i>The Telegrap h</i>	<i>The Guardi an</i>	<i>The Independ ent</i>	<i>The Daily Mail</i>	<i>The Sun</i>	<i>The Mirro r</i>	<i>The Daily Express</i>	Total %
Terror	46	33	41	71	39	54	66	86	55
Criminality / Violence	19	29	6	-	13	12	13	4	11.5
Celebrity	4	21	19	14	17	7	7	4	11
Focus on a specific convert/ Convert stories	23	14	22	10	26	27	7	4	18
Race/ ethnicity	-	-	11	-	-	-	-	-	1.5
Gender	-	-	-	-	4	-	-	-	0.5
Opinion piece	8	-	-	5	-	-	7	-	2
Other	-	3	-	-	1	-	-	2	0.5

That this percentage appearing in terror-related articles is smaller than those identified in the Faith Matters report by Brice is in part a result of the number of articles published either directly or indirectly as a result of that report. It was in fact these articles, which focused on the stories of individual converts, that formed the second largest topic category, totaling 18%. The rest of this paper is

accordingly split into two main sections. At first we will look at the largest category, the terror-related articles, in section one. The second section will then analyze those articles that appear to present converts' stories to the readers.

1. Terror and Violence

While newspapers report on converts who clearly have been involved in violent acts or acts of terror, how they do so is also extremely important in order to understand by what method the idea of converts as "threat" is developed. In this way, the numbers above do not in fact tell the whole story. An important part of how discourses are developed and structured in newspapers is through what Fairclough has termed "scale of presence" as part of the global text structure²⁵. The most important points are foregrounded, that is, appear in the banner headline, subhead or very beginning of the lead paragraph; and less important points are backgrounded, appearing later in the text. In this structural way, the location of an actor is an important feature of the discourse. This section develops the ways in which in these stories British converts to Islam are represented as a particular kind of threat.

Chains of Conversion

The word "convert" is an important identifier, informationally foregrounded in the articles and therefore given privileged importance in the discourse. In fact, the labels "convert", "white convert" or "Muslim convert" act as the main subject possessing agency in lead paragraphs and headlines, especially in the early running of a story, before the (nearly always) man is identified by name. Thus, for example, the headline: "Teenage Muslim convert planned to behead soldiers", which is then followed by: "Brusthom Ziamani referred [to] Michael Adebolajo, one of the two men who hacked Fusilier Lee Rigby to death, as a 'legend'"²⁶.

As well as the association created through labeling, a causal chain with conversion to Islam as its central and defining feature is also constructed. One way in which the sense of threat is heightened is how it tends to be portrayed as a "path to radicalization".²⁷ The speed and directness of the linkage between conversion and radicalization is a common feature and either implicit in sentences such as "Dart, who converted to Islam after being radicalized by British Islamist Anjem Choudary"²⁸, or explicit in sentences or headlines such as: "Convert was radicalized within weeks"²⁹, or "recently converted to Islam".³⁰ In these ways conversion itself is directly and inextricably linked in a chain of causality and converts are represented as not converts to a religion, but rather as converts to a dangerous ideology of terror or radicalization more specifically. In an exceptionally strong case an article about Andrew Ibrahim, who was charged with terrorism offences in Bristol, reads "The convert to terror"³¹, where little room is left for equivocation over the association.

There is then a sense in which converts are equally a monolithic category in this regard and both a phenomenon in themselves, worthy of foregrounding, but also drawn into the other monolithic and dominant discourse of "the Muslim terrorist". In these ways they are at once located in an already established "other", and simultaneously the phenomenon of conversion to Islam itself is highlighted as a potential threat.

Making up the Numbers

The foregrounding itself is again only part of how the discourse is constructed. That is, the fact of them being a convert is itself of central significance. In a number of articles, and in spite of multiple arrests, it is the convert who features in the lead. For example, despite there being three arrests, it was Tarik Hassane who is the focus of the article and who stands foregrounded in the headline "Muslim Convert held in terror plot investigation"³², the other two only get a passing mention. Moreover, the convert is nearly always the lead picture, and in some articles the only one pictured.³³ The use of pictures forms an important part of the multi-modality of the articles, and important visual aspects to the discourse

alongside the linguistic. Thus, the combination of the foregrounding of the convert against the others involved pictorially, organizationally on the “scale of presence”, and linguistically helps create a stronger linkage and privilege between the event or act and the convert as perpetrator. Such a foregrounding of the convert can also be seen in the headline: “British Muslim convert jailed for preparing acts of terrorism”, which is then followed by: “Richard Dart and co-conspirators Jahangir Alom and Imran Mahmood were ‘committed fundamentalists’, says judge” and then, “Three British Islamic extremists including a Muslim convert and a former police community support officer have been jailed for terrorism.”³⁴ In these ways a clear and emphasized linkage is set up between the label “convert” and terror and extreme violence, and by association moral and political views.

This may also reflect the fact that stories about Muslim extremism and terrorism have become a common feature in news reporting, and the convert represents something newer within something old. Such stories, despite their proportionate distortion may also represent the fact that they are more newsworthy in that they have more “legs” and so run for longer. Therefore, and importantly, this indicates that these kinds of (mis)representation are an inherent and inbuilt part of the structure of the commercial aspect of newspapers in more general terms. This notwithstanding, the impact of such distortion is an important part of how the discourse is developed and maintained.

Cultural Threat

The prominence of both the convert and in particular the white convert often rests on the premise of cultural contrast, and an important feature of the discourse and the othering of Muslim converts is the feature of cultural threat along with the more physical threat posed by terror and violence. Indeed, there has been an increase in the number of articles focusing on the cultural and religious differences between Islam and Britain or “the West” more generally.³⁵ In this way the convert is othered by being moved from an “us” to a “them”. Verbs such as “turn into” and “transform” are common when describing this process, focusing on the idea of this dramatic change.

The cultural threat angle of the discourse is set up in opposition to what is represented as the culturally acceptable norm of behavior and views. They can also be seen as examples of the failure of integration into British life, and is one way in which non-White converts are at times separated out from white converts. For example, despite Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebowale being “British-born” and “Britons”, their murder of Lee Rigby belied that they had only “*seemingly* integrated into national life”³⁶.

Frequently, othering is drawn through contrasting the fact that the converts were from Christian backgrounds, and thus a more direct contrast between Britain’s Christian heritage and Islam’s supposed foreignness and more overtly religious presence. This is at times done through reporting family reaction, for example, “She [Michael Adebowale’s mother] is a God-fearing woman who is devoted to her children. She will be so devastated by these events.”³⁷ At other times it is done through establishing before and after tales, with converts having come from “normal”, “caring” homes. Christianity in these articles is positioned more as a cultural, heritage label that has provided for a sound moral sense and grounding than a religious one. The subjects were previously, for instance, “well-mannered” and “normal”: “Murder suspect [Michael Adebolajo] was well-mannered schoolboy before turning to militant Islam”; “Tony, 23, said: ‘Mike was a normal kid – football, bit of blow, girlfriends, the normal things.’”³⁸ This is set in contrast to them becoming, for instance, “militant”, “The 30-year-old son of teachers from Weymouth, who shocked his family when he became a militant Muslim”³⁹. It is also his conversion that is attributed to him “go[ing] from being calm and rational” to a killer. Samantha Lewthwaite, who became known as the “White Widow”, generated a great deal of media interest both reporting on and trying to explain her activities and conversion. This contrast is continually emphasized as part of how she is labelled. We are told for example that she was “just an average British girl”⁴⁰, an “ordinary English school kid” or “angel-faced British girl” who had a “seemingly conventional upbringing”⁴¹. In this way her “Britishness” or “Englishness” is attached to

normalness. Then, however, she undergoes a “transformation”, following which she “wed [Germaine Lindsay, one of the London 7/7 bombers] within months”; she “went to school in Aylesbury before converting to Islam and marrying one of the 7/7 bombers”.⁴² Again the directness and speed is emphasized both by the use of *within* and in the sentence construction. This foregrounding obscures the absent or more complex back-stories. For example, Adebolajo had become involved in violence and gangs before his family moved away, resulting in a breakdown in family relations all before his conversion. There are also often pre-existing mental health issues which are significantly backgrounded, leaving their conversion as the prime explanatory factor.

Furthermore, there is an interesting contrast between the “typical” and “ordinary” Christian (British) upbringing with positive, even strict, values, and “traditional” Muslims, who while also “strict” are so in a far more negative way. Rather than the strictness of tradition instilling good manners as in a “strict and loving upbringing”, it is again illiberal and a cause of extremism. An article on Ashraf Islam in the *Mirror*⁴³ includes this about his mother: “His mother, Angela, 55, a devout and practicing Christian, was being cared for by family and was last night said to be deeply shocked by allegations about her youngest son”, and this about Islam: “Raised as a Christian, he has a history of criminal offences for fraud but was radicalized after his last spell behind bars in 2011”. The “but” is extremely important here. Although his criminal past is a central part of the back story, the use of “but” has the effect of separating that off. His plans are thus in a way not merely a continuation or escalation of criminal activity by someone with a long history of it, but the conversion and radicalization are positioned as something causally central; and this also stands in contrast to Christianity.

This section has described how British converts to Islam are repositioned as “other”. In a number of respects this is similar to reporting on Muslims more generally. However, the threat they represent is given further dimensions through the foregrounding of them as converts and *as such* being portrayed as a particular kind of physical and cultural threat.

2. The Individual Stories: In Their Own Words (?)

“Your questions are so predictable,” she says, scathingly⁴⁴.

In contrast to the general dearth of Muslims appearing in “normal” stories, a significant number of the articles in this sample have as their central topic more apparently “normal” stories, or stories in which “normal” Muslim converts are the focus. This is in large part as they were published following and often with direct reference to the Faith Matters report.⁴⁵ The report itself made a number of important findings in addition to the estimate of numbers and these themes are variously picked up by the newspaper reports. How they are done so, however, points towards dominant discursive frameworks of articles which actually represent converts as not “normal” in important ways.

In the first instance the fact that the Faith Matters report generated coverage across the mainstream press and resulted in a number of vignettes would suggest the critical impact that reports such as Kevin Brice’s can have on mainstream discourses, and their importance as a source affecting cultural knowledge production.⁴⁶ It may seem to be an important corrective to the reporting discussed in the section on terror-related articles above. An analysis of how these are presented and reported, nonetheless, sheds light on the fact that the dominant meaning frames and discourses they are found in has not altered enough, as the quote at the opening of this section expresses through journalist and Muslim convert Yvonne Ridley’s irritation and the reporter’s negative response to this irritation.

A tendency in these articles are “catch all” monolithic categories. Headlines such as “How 100,000 Britons have chosen to become Muslim... and average convert is 27-year-old white woman” accompanied by a picture of two women in the street wearing *niqab* foregrounds race, gender and age, restricting range and hinting at explanations being needed for why young, white women are converting.⁴⁷ This is enhanced by surprise expressed by the adverbial “just” and the use of “but” to

draw a contrast when it says “average age at conversion is *just* 27. *But* report argued that most converts saw *their religion* as ‘perfectly compatible’ with living in Britain”. Even more explicitly, further surprise and need for explanation are emphasized in the headline: “Why ARE so many modern British career women converting to Islam?”.⁴⁸ The use of capitals here and the word “modern” both serve to underline the surprise and need for explanation, therefore establishing British (career) women in opposition to Islam as restrictive of women’s roles, reproducing discourses in which Islam is frequently portrayed as anachronistically misogynistic and oppressive of women and their rights, often reducing them to passive beings and victims of the bonds of tradition and culture.

In fact, the discourse of cultural clash runs through these articles. “Caught between two cultures: how Muslim converts are left to fend for themselves” ran one headline, and focuses on the problems of conversion, lack of mosque support and women’s attitudes to the *hijab*.⁴⁹ Indeed, the *hijab* is a constant theme and in this vein has become a marker of “disproportionate symbolic significance both within and without Muslim communities”⁵⁰ of how progressive or oppressive a particular society is.⁵¹ This is also a point made by Abdal Hakim Murad, a British Muslim academic, who laments that veiling is increasingly seen in sociological terms of identity affirmation rather than religious terms.⁵² Absent again from this report, and made absent by the headline, is that the majority of converts see no clash between being Muslim and being British, and in fact offer far more nuanced and varied views on culture.

The *Telegraph*’s comparable piece is embedded not in the Faith Matters report but in the story of Sarah Willis, who was arrested and cleared of killing her boyfriend in an argument about her behavior.⁵³ The discourse that dominates this piece is, therefore, one of cultural clash based on the breakdown of their relationship. The bold type quotes used as sub-headings sum up the angle taken: “He’ll make you his slave”; “Misguided men put pressure on women”; “I’m more religious than my husband”; and “Muslims isolated me from their community”.

Also significant is how the findings and arguments in the Faith Matters report itself are represented. Lines of emphasis here also reveal attitudes of incompatibility, and stand in noticeable contrast to the emphasis in the report. For example:

More than one in four accepted there was a ‘natural conflict’ between being a devout Muslim and living in the UK. Nine out of ten women converts said their change of religion had led to them dressing more conservatively. More than half started wearing a head scarf and 5 per cent had worn the burka.⁵⁴

Here, the choice of “more than one in four” could have been “almost three in four accepted there was not a natural conflict.” This would, moreover, have better represented the report itself.

These oppositional and monolithic categories both ignore the positive attraction of a gender role mentioned by these women, found also in studies in other European countries⁵⁵, and the diversity of roles within both “Muslim” and “British”. Studies in Germany, Scandinavia, Britain and the Netherlands have found that converts are attracted to the female gender role and its concepts of motherhood and womanhood offered by Islam, and they are critical of the perceived over-individualisation and sexualisation (particularly of the female body) in dominant Western society and discourse⁵⁶, highlighting that female converts are developing alternative feminist discourses. Some scholars have gone back to history and texts to “give precedence to the ethical voice of Islam” and emphasize its “stubbornly egalitarian” nature.⁵⁷ By so doing they are seeking to open up the space which has been limited for them in wider discourse, and explore and express “the Muslim woman’s full human agency and dignity”.⁵⁸ Such work also highlights how “Muslim” and “Western” discourses are enmeshed and implicated through history (particularly as a result of colonialism) and globalization in ways that do not form part of dominant discourses.⁵⁹ This historical entanglement, variation in

discourses, and agency of the converts making a positive choice for their lives is not reflected in these newspaper articles, which continue to rely on underlying orientalist frames.

“Presenting” Convert Stories

In addition to the more direct reporting on the findings of the report, a number of articles that “presented” converts in the form of vignettes accompanied or followed. Immediately noteworthy is that while the terror-related articles were overwhelmingly about male converts, the focus in this category is overwhelmingly female. As many of the articles note, the Faith Matters report estimated that 75% of converts are female, so a female focus may be appropriate and inevitable. Nevertheless, not only do women feature to a higher ratio than three to one in these reports, this imbalance as a result does little to address a gender demarcation where male converts are represented as criminal and terrorist threats. Interestingly, many of these articles, particularly those presented in the broadsheet newspapers, are unaccompanied by any reporting so to speak. Instead they are left to stand alone. A Guardian article, for example, presents six female converts, each with picture and 300-400 words in which they speak.⁶⁰ While these types of articles are to be welcomed, they also highlight large gaps in the reporting of newspapers.

There are two important points to note with regard to this. Firstly, based on interviews, but presented as “own word vignettes” the interviewer’s choice of questions and thus framework appear obscured. Secondly, standing alone as they do without comment and expansion by the reporter also means that avenues of discourse mentioned by the converts that are not features of other main news articles, such as a focus on the spiritual and religious aspect of faith, gender equality, feminist positions, criticisms of aspects of UK society or foreign policy, and prejudice from non-Muslim Britons, are restricted to short quotes and not expanded or engaged with. These women speak about the spiritual and religious side of their conversion and about Islam, a “symbiosis of love and intellectual ideas” that “strengthened my ethics and morals” for Andrea Chishti, as well as prejudice they face from Muslims and non-Muslims. They also talk about the gradual process of their conversion, a year and a half for Anita Nayyar and “the result of a long search for a more spiritual alternative to Catholicism” for Dr. Annie Coxon. They also talk about their experiences and attitudes as women positively embracing Islam. Ioni Sullivan remarks that she stopped seeing certain Islamic practices “as restrictions on personal freedom and realized they were ways of achieving self-control.” These articles also point to the diversity of practice amongst converts. Anita Nayyar and Dr. Annie Coxon, for instance, reject the need to wear a headscarf. Similar aspects are also expressed by male converts: one remarks: “Everything is so consumer-driven here, there are always adverts pushing you to buy the next thing. I knew there must be something longer term and always admired the sense of contentment within my colleagues’ lives, their sense of peace and calmness.”⁶¹

Despite these alternative emphases, the idea of threat and fear, reflecting language similar to that of terror, can still be seen in similar vignette pieces. The headlines, “The Islamification of Britain”⁶², “Women and Islam: The rise and rise of the convert”⁶³, and “Surge in Britons converting to Islam: White women lead a wave of Britons embracing Islam”⁶⁴ use phrasing suggestive of a burgeoning threat, that Britain is being changed, or even taken over. Another lead paragraph ran “In 2001, there were an estimated 60,000 Muslim converts in Britain. Since then, the country has seen the spread of violent Islamist extremism and terror plots, including the July 7 bombings.”⁶⁵ This headline thus draws a direct line between the phenomenon of conversion to Islam and terrorism.

The vignettes appearing in one *Independent* article⁶⁶ do provide more gender balance, with three men and three women. Nevertheless, they largely stick to familiar topics in the selection of interview segments strung together: the three women all include comments on *hijab*, and two on negative experiences of going to mosque and family relations. With the men we can still find some of the traces

of aspects mentioned in the discussion in the previous section. A contradiction in the article emphasizes speed of conversion for Paul: it introduced him converting when “*just* a student” (emphasis added) and a “one-off meeting with an older Muslim”, when two paragraphs down Paul describes meeting the *imam* twice a few weeks apart and already having had contact with Muslims and the Qur’an. Daoud is presented as “deeply socially conservative” and believing that “we do need an Islamic state.”⁶⁷ These choices also obscure the main findings of the report (and those of a Gallup World Poll⁶⁸) that the majority of converts feel both British and Muslim, see more good than bad in British culture, and that there is no natural conflict between being a Muslim and living in the UK.⁶⁹

“Reporting” Stories of Converts

While the broadsheet newspapers the *Independent* and the *Guardian* presented their coverage in the form of vignettes, other papers, and particularly the tabloids, ran more conventional interview articles in their presentation of “normal” converts. These often feature contrasts in aspects of lifestyle that highlight incompatibility, and there is a tendency to focus on Islam being a conservative, restrictive religion involving dramatic changes in lifestyle, diet (no alcohol and pork) and clothing. Another feature of this is the often “normal” Muslim converts selected in tabloids in fact represent other non-conventional lifestyles, for example, a burlesque dancer, a glamour model, and in an article in the *Times* a “Mohican”.⁷⁰ These choices both sharpen the contrast and also reflect an aspect of the discourse of conversion and converts as being “not normal.” This restrictiveness forms a focus to a greater extent on what converts have “lost” rather than gained, and also obscures the emphasis by the converts themselves on the positive aspects of Islam in contrast to their criticisms of British lifestyles, and on the reported fact that the majority do not see a clash in the ideas of being Muslim and British. The following is a selection which captures these emphases: “From burlesque to burqa”⁷¹ (despite the fact that in the picture she is wearing a headscarf, not a burqa); “she loved partying *but* converted to Islam”⁷²; “Her conversion from Ibiza party girl to hijab-wearing Muslim in barely three months”⁷³; “Former burlesque dancer ditches booze and converts to Islam after meeting toyboy lover”⁷⁴; “Glam to Islam”⁷⁵; “Sharia comes the bride”⁷⁶.

The *Sun* piece “Glam to Islam” is followed by two short additional paragraphs: one by a behavior expert warning that “no lifestyle is perfect” and “waking up to the realities of a new life can be crushing”; the other is by the *Sun*’s agony aunt, a columnist who provides advice for readers’ problems, who asks “how long before she yearns to speak her mind or let her hair down? What if Mohammed throws her past back in her face?” These comments again enhance negative stereotypes of untrustworthy men, damage to children and negative cultural stereotypes of controlling oppressive husbands. These articles, therefore, do little to challenge monolithic categories and stereotypes. This is in fact further demonstrated by the exception of Khadijah’s husband, who “never pressured her to convert”, but here notably this is because “He’d been in this country for a few years so he’d adapted to the Western lifestyle”. As a result of being represented as “us”, he can here be represented in a more positive way.

Furthermore, in these articles, not only are the positive aspects of Islam highlighted by the converts, and the fact that their contact with Islam has changed their previous perceptions, left without journalist comment, mentions of prejudice and abuse from non-Muslims are continually not expanded and are in fact softened by journalists’ comments.

The *Sun* article⁷⁷ explains how “Alana wears traditional Islamic dress, including a headscarf, and is now used to getting strange looks when she’s out in public”. This description is in contrast to Alana’s words when she said she, “lives in fear of being verbally abused in public”. Likewise, in the “Former burlesque dancer ditches booze and converts to Islam after meeting toyboy lover” from the *Mirror* quoted above, the journalist paraphrases “I’ve been abused” rendering it “a number of problems socially”, and then “However, for all the friends she has lost, Jameela is happy to have gained new

ones”. Thus, the abuse is ignored. It also cements the stereotyped link of female converting for a man further by a reader poll at the end of article asking readers, “would you change religion if you met the right person”.

Furthermore, in addition to prejudice from non-Muslims, Muslim prejudice is a real and important part of many converts’ experiences. They can often feel isolated from, and by, born Muslim communities, which may even be resistant to them; mosques, for example, are generally ill-equipped to be able to meet their needs⁷⁸. This is especially the case for women, who are often in a subordinate position to men in public arenas like the mosque.⁷⁹ In fact a report by the Muslim Women’s Network paints a largely negative picture of *imams* and mosques as a ‘male space’ in which women do not feel comfortable or confident⁸⁰. Nevertheless, in these articles that this prejudice is emphasized to the deemphasizing of non-Muslim prejudice reveals much about how Muslims and converts are represented in the dominant discourse.

In a *Telegraph* article, the use of “But at the same time, Kayani had issues trying to befriend existing Muslims”⁸¹, rather than Muslim prejudice being in addition to non-Muslim prejudice, it is contrasted, thus weight is added to this section of the report. Likewise, in the *Times*:

When people see that you are white and British that’s when they get really abusive, because they think you’ve turned your back on their way of living, she added. But as the Faith Matters report concludes, the majority of converts view the Muslim faith as “perfectly compatible with Western life”.⁸²

While the first sentence, the direct quote, expresses the abuse she has received, the reporter in the adjoining sentence turns the focus, not to the views of the abusers and lack of compatibility, nor to the fact of abuse, but to the views of converts and their overall sense of compatibility. Thus, while this is a more positive description of converts, it is done so in negation of a negative view of wider attitudes.

Converts, as described above, are represented as dangling between two cultures that are largely incompatible. The overall portrayal is one of similarity between how Islam and converts are portrayed, on the one hand, and how Western lifestyle is portrayed on the other hand, that these two are different entities rather than representative of variety, and that the former is inferior. Thus, Islam is represented in “closed” ways. This fact also serves to background the view that Muslim and British can indeed be one and the same and that converts can be seen as uniquely intermediary and can and do act as bridge builders between communities that may lack contact otherwise.

Conclusion

If “redescribing a world is the necessary first step towards changing it,”⁸³ then the discourse in the mainstream newspapers on this evidence remain part of discourses with many more features of what the Runnymede Trust identified as “closed” views rather than “open” views⁸⁴. Concepts are set up in simple terms, ignoring diversity both of “convert” and “Muslim” as well as “British” and “West”. As such it restricts the space, whether explicitly or tacitly, for “alternative thinkable and shareable subject positions”⁸⁵ and thus Britain and “us” as a space of multiculturalism. As a result, a binary opposition is set up, supporting the idea of a “clash of cultures” with converts and Islam as the “other”.

The power of the hegemonic nature of this discourse and its commonsensical nature means that contradictions to it are routinely ignored. That this is so, even when faced and challenged with alternatives, points to the fact that the power to make the meanings is not shared. There may be a shift in the balance of the type of stories that converts are featured in, in so far as there are some instances of “normal” converts’ stories being told, but this apparently broadly positive move is so only with some caution as these remain caught in old frames and there is a lack of discursive engagement. While they

may shift to ideas of identity and nation and be less totalizing than an overtly Orientalist perspective, it is notable that when greater variation or alternatives to the mainstream narrative were present they were so either without reporter comment and thus ignored for expansion in favor of parts that fitted more conventionally, or were ignored or played down in the linguistic structure of how the journalist treated them. In these ways, the representations were “contained.”

Newspapers are commercial enterprises with a strong interest and need to sell their product in order to survive and may argue that people are capable of looking further and do not necessarily believe all that they read. Indeed studies that have included audience interviews and thus looked at the consumption side of news have found that views can be more nuanced than those presented in the news.⁸⁶ Moreover, alternatives do exist. Non-mainstream papers can be a source of alternative discourses and more positively represent minorities as in the Muslim news. This was also found in studies on British Muslims that included analysis of local or regional newspapers.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, these have not penetrated the mainstream even when mainstream newspapers draw specifically on reports that present a different picture.

Given their reach and powerful social effects, a social constructionist perspective highlights that newspapers cannot be considered impartial observers or reporters, but rather constitutive actors in a privileged position. While it may make sense that the mainstream press, catering for a mainstream audience is not critical of what is perceived to be the majority culture when in contrast to a culture seen as “other”, this is precisely the problem: and from the production side of the newspaper business an inherently structural one. Converts may well be a “minority within a minority”, but as long as dominant discourses are characterized by closed rather than open views, a static and homogenous view of culture is perpetuated and people are as a result excluded from being thought of, understood and represented as a diverse “us”. Rather than the phenomenon being seen as part of diversity in a dynamic social space, points of how they are moving out of integration are prominent, helping make them “other” and “foreign” in a process which has been called the “re-racialization” of British converts to Islam⁸⁸.

It may be possible to see converts as occupying a unique, intermediary, “bridging” position as some academic studies suggest. Yet, this is not how they are represented in the mainstream press. Through discourses of Islamic terror and culture clash they are framed as moving to an “other”. It is through cultural differences, and predominantly differences seen as incompatible, **that newspapers relate British converts to Islam to the West and to Britain, or rather dissociate them, as the case may be.**

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NOTES

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